Gregson: The Manchester Years (1996–2013)

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WHEN EDWARD GREGSON was appointed principal of the Royal Northern College of Music in 1996, I was not alone in wondering if such a demanding position would interrupt the steady stream of new works that had flowed from his pen during his years at Goldsmiths' College. In fact, rather than stemming the flow, Gregson's move to Manchester and the heart of the city's musical life created fresh opportunities. Time was clearly at a premium, but what was available for composing was used wisely. The creative spine was provided by a continuing series of concertos and a productive return to the brass band medium after a number of years 'away'. I will be exploring the principal characteristics of major works from this period, focusing particularly on the ways in which Gregson weaves stylistic and personal tributes into his musical fabric.

In 1994, as a serendipitous prelude to his Manchester years, Gregson received his first major commission from the BBC Philharmonic. Although he has since described the resulting Clarinet Concerto as a 'break-through' piece, his life-long fascination for the concerto genre began in his youth: 'Some of the earliest musical memories that I can recall are listening to piano concertos for the first time, I must have been about 12 and I fell in love with them – all the way from Mozart to Brahms, via Rachmaninov to Bartók'.[1] Having been brought up in a Salvationist family, it was inevitable that the brilliant sound of the British brass band should also play an important part in his composing career: 'Throughout my teens I was living in a parallel universe of musical experiences – on the one hand playing music by some fine brass band composers and on the other being absorbed in the music of the 20th-century mainstream.'

Listening to early works like the prize-winning Brass Quintet, composed as a student of Alan Bush at the Royal Academy of Music,

[1] All quotations are derived from conversations with the composer recorded between 2002 and May 2013.

or his early Oboe Sonata, it is evident that Gregson was already learning much from the examples of Bartók and Hindemith. Occasionally one can sense the wit of Walton and more often the timeless modality of Vaughan Williams, but this is counterbalanced by an incisiveness drawn from his love of Stravinsky: 'Hearing the *Rite of Spring* for the first time changed my musical world'. In his 30s, Gregson was drawn to the mosaic forms of Tippett, audibly so in the Piano Sonata (1982), and the temporal and textural freedom of Lutoslawski in works like the *Metamorphoses* (1979) and the Clarinet Concerto.

The composers he cites as his most important influences are Shostakovich and Alban Berg. The impact of Berg's highly wrought poly-tonal expressionism was a catalyst in broadening the expressive range of Gregson's mature work. The other ever-present exemplar has been Shostakovich. In the early *Music for Chamber Orchestra* (1968) the reliance on the Fifth Symphony as a model was perhaps too near the surface, but in his later work, including the Concerto for Orchestra, Cello Concerto, the fugue in *Rococo Variations* and especially the *Symphony in Two Movements*, Gregson has returned often to the Russian's example, finding the way he uses atonal twelve-note sets as a means of creating tension and emotional contrast within his customary tonal/modal language a particularly fruitful model. This is a consciously eclectic mix – Gregson has described himself as a poly-stylist – informing an approach that is a model of economy and discipline; and, since his move to Manchester, remarkably consistent, increasingly colourful and wide-ranging in expression.

The Manchester concertos

What captured Gregson's imagination as a young man and still informs his creative thinking some fifty years later is the dramatic nature of the concerto genre: 'I was intrigued to discover the ways in which composers pitted the soloist (or individual) against the power of an orchestra, as if in a Shakespearian tragedy (e.g., Hamlet) and how the themes were shared and developed, often reaching a climax and resolution that no other musical form could achieve.' Gregson's first effort was a Concertante written in 1966 as an RAM student for his own instrument, the piano, with brass band. Distant memory may lend enchantment, but I have a lingering impression of romantic melody and a level of enterprise and craftsmanship that one did not always encounter in Salvationist repertoire.

In his first full-scale concerto, composed for French horn in 1971, Gregson attempted a rapprochement between the technical and stylistic ambition of the 20th-century mainstream and the traditions of the brass band in which he was nurtured. Five years later his popular Tuba Concerto appeared, also originally with brass band, although it has just as often been performed with orchestra or wind band. In the context of his later concertos, the Tuba Concerto is notable for the inclusion of a few bars from the pioneering example that Ralph Vaughan Williams composed in 1954, as a fleeting moment of musical homage. Since then, the idea of referencing, occasionally through direct quotation but more often through stylistic suggestion or paraphrase, has become one of Gregson's creative trademarks:

> The Violin Concerto (2000) looks back with affection to some 20th-century landmarks of the violin repertoire. The Concerto for Piano and Wind pays tribute to those composers whose concertos I loved when I was a teenager. There are no actual quotes used, rather a more general stylistic 'conflict' where neo-classicism meets romanticism head on. In the slow movement of my Saxophone Concerto (2006), I actually quote the opening of the Berg Violin Concerto, mainly because my own musical fabric in that movement is built on a twelve-note row with a strong reference to major and minor thirds (which the Berg note row is built upon). In my Trumpet Concerto (1983), the slow movement uses Shostakovich's musical cipher DSCH as the main reference point to what is an In Memoriam to the Russian master who had died not long before I started writing the work.

Concerto for Piano and Wind, *Homages*

Composing a Concerto for Piano and Wind with wind accompaniment brings to mind Stravinsky's masterwork of 1924. Gregson's instrumentation is identical, with the addition of a soprano saxophone, but any direct influence is minimal. Subtitled *Homages*, Gregson's referencing is much broader, in keeping with his own eclectic approach to style and influence. Commissioned by the Berkshire Music Trust in 1995, it is dedicated to that fine British composer-pianist John McCabe, who gave the first performance of a revised version in November 1997 with the RNCM Wind Orchestra conducted by Clark Rundell, shortly after Gregson's appointment as college principal. The writing for piano at the start of the high-spirited *Toccata*, with its double octaves, brings Bartók's concertos to mind. The lyrical second subject is more romantically tinged – with the voices of Rachmaninov or Poulenc somewhere in the background. A further nod in the direction of Bartók's Concerto no. 2 and a

suggestion of Prokofiev's Third, cleverly woven in on the piano as a countersubject to the main theme, drive the music towards a pounding climax.

The middle movement is an elegantly worked passacaglia, and the finale, *Rondo-Burlesque*, takes its rhythmic impetus from the example of Bartók's many dance movements. As the driving rhythms ease into something more regular, the melodic outline of the piano figuration gradually transforms itself into a new more sustained melody on the brass. This is a 12th-century English hymn melody credited to St Godric – a counterpart to the Hungarian folk melodies that Bartók integrated into his folk-inspired works perhaps.

Concerto for Violin and Orchestra

The Violin Concerto is a Millennium piece. Composed in the last months of the 20th century, and commissioned by the Hallé for its new leader Lyn Fletcher, it was first performed under Kent Nagano at the Bridgewater Hall in February 2000. It resonates with distant memories of violin concertos of the century, recalled with affection: 'I found it impossible to resist the temptation to look back and give some respectful nods in certain musical directions. The music doesn't use any direct quotation, but it has an illusory veneer of so doing – without, I hope, any self-consciousness.' Concerto 'spotters' might hear echoes of Berg, Prokofiev, Walton and John Adams, but the underlying musical argument – always Gregson's primary consideration – is very much his own. There is also a significant extra-musical dimension that rarely appeared in Gregson's earlier abstract musical designs. Each movement is prefaced by lines of poetry. The first is from Oscar Wilde's *The Harlot's House*: 'But she – she heard the violin, and left my side, and entered in; Love passed into the house of lust.' The violin emerges out of a sensuous, but strangely threatening texture. In Wilde's poem, the woman is haunted by the sound of a distant waltz, with the violin as the instrument of seduction. Gregson responds with a soaring cantilena and, at the climax, a bitonal parody of the waltz.

Its menacing, black-edged colours are transformed into more sensual hues for the second movement, in response to the evocative lines of Paul Verlaine's *Chanson d'automne*: 'The drawn-out sobs of the violins of autumn wound my heart with a monotonous languor.' Strings, with harp and tam-tam, begin the transformation. The soloist takes it up and in the central section braying horns add their power to the main theme, which is beginning to take on the role of an *idée fixe*.

The music of the opening, subtly transformed, provides an oasis of tranquillity before the final dance, which is an athletic rondo, inspired by the violin of Irish folk-lore and headed, appropriately, by two lines of W. B. Yeats: 'And the merry love the fiddle, And the merry love to dance.'

Concerto for Saxophone and Orchestra

Gregson's perennial concern to provide a strong underlying musical logic is undiminished in the Saxophone Concerto (2006), which is not a tribute-dominated work, but reveals his orchestral palette at its most seductive. It was commissioned and first performed by the Japanese saxophonist Nobuya Sugawa, with the BBC Philharmonic conducted by Clark Rundell. The music exploits musical contrasts to the full – angular thematic cells (and their associated harmonic ambiguities) on the one hand and the calmer, overtly tonal allure of his melodies on the other – with much more freedom, not to say abandon, especially in the first of the three movements, which the composer describes as a 'City-scape'. The solo alto saxophone is heard at the start from the distance, as though from the other end of a long avenue at dusk, or through a mist or haze. Eventually, soloist and orchestra come together in full view as it were in a burst of energy that builds to a wild jazzy dance, only to be dissipated in a moment of gentle, haunting lyricism. Once again the finale opens in search of a theme, which arrives at the end in a blaze of life-affirming colour.

In the slow movement the musical landscape is transformed. It is prefaced by another quotation, on this occasion from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's poem *Kubla Khan* (of 1798): 'A damsel with a dulcimer in a vision once I saw. Could I revive within me her symphony and song?' Coleridge's wonderfully evocative lines draw from Gregson a series of song-like paragraphs, some of which rework material from a piece for oboe and percussion entitled *Shadow of Paradise* (2005). The bitter-sweet chromatic harmony melds without any sense of contrivance into the fleeting reference to the opening of the Berg Violin Concerto, after which, the harmonic content becomes simpler, unfolding into the final 'song', set in the composer's favourite siciliana pulse, expresses a heartfelt sadness.

Concerto for Cello and Orchestra, *A Song for Chris*

Of all Gregson's concertos so far, *A Song for Chris* (2007) is the most personal in its tribute. Written for a classical-size orchestra, it was commissioned by the RNCM Manchester International Cello Festival

and first performed in May 2007 by Li-Wei and Manchester Camerata, conducted by Douglas Boyd. It was dedicated to the memory of Christopher Rowland (1946–2007) who was director of chamber music at the RNCM throughout Gregson's tenure as principal.

The Concerto's four movements – *Meditation, Intermezzo, Toccata-Scherzo* and *Song* – span a single arch, with the two short outer movements framing two fast central ones. As in the clarinet and saxophone concertos the soloist enters alone, meditating on a series of small fragments. These gradually take on a more organic flow, evolving through as 'a pyramid twelve-tone chord' to an intense climax.

For many years Christopher Rowland had been a member of the Fitzwilliam String Quartet – the first to record a complete set of the Shostakovich quartets. Given that Chris was born in the same year as Shostakovich completed his Third Quartet, Gregson came up with the idea of referencing its opening bars in the middle of the *Intermezzo*, commenting that 'The ghost of Shostakovich looms large throughout the concerto in more ways than one.' A number of other fleeting references are secreted in, such as the little four-note motto that runs through the Russian's first Cello Concerto in the energetic *Toccata-Scherzo*. But these are not the 'main events' in this eloquent music, the design of which follows Gregson's well-established method, projecting the 'life' of the musical motifs from their enigmatic birth, through pathways of conflict and contrast to end in hopeful resolution, in this case a simple, uplifting melody with bells.

Breaking the brass band mould

In his 20s and early 30s, Gregson wrote extensively for the brass band, effectively refining his technique in that medium. Over the years he has returned to the medium from time to time, and he continues to be an inspirational and influential figure in the word of brass bands. Soon after completing the Violin Concerto, he embarked on a second Millennium work to a commission from the Foden's Brass Band (based in Sandbach), whose centenary was to be marked at a gala concert in the Bridgewater Hall in May 2000.

The Trumpets of the Angels

Free of the constraints of the brass band contesting tradition, which arguably sometimes weighed rather heavily on his earlier brass band works, Gregson produced his most ambitious essay for brass to date: 'The chance to create a new extended work which would break out of the brass band mould was an important milestone for me.' Entitled *The Trumpets of the Angels*, it had its origins in a shorter choral work,

… And the Seven Trumpets …, composed in 1998 for the Huddersfield Choral Society and the BBC Philharmonic. This employed the full power of symphonic brass, with seven trumpets and four Wagner tubas placed strategically around Huddersfield Town Hall.

In *The Trumpets of the Angels* the thirteen-minute original has been expanded into a twenty-minute epic for brass band, with the addition of the seven trumpets, organ, and percussion. An array of bells and gongs offers an unmistakable key to the source of Gregson's inspiration. Inscribed 'In tribute to Olivier Messiaen', the work's principal material and its sound world, but crucially not the underlying musical processes, are clearly influenced by Messiaen's masterpiece for wind and percussion, *Et exspecto resurrectionem mortuorum* (1964). One might also cite the precedent, if not the influence, of the first major work for brass band and choir, *The Trumpets* by Gilbert Vinter, and of Philip Wilby's first brass band score *The New Jerusalem* (1989), both of which draw from the Book of Revelation, where St John's prophecy of the Day of Judgement includes a vision of seven angels with seven trumpets.

Like the later concertos, *The Trumpets of the Angels* begins in the distance, with the braying of tenor and baritone horns off stage – suggestive of the start of an ancient ritual. Six trumpets set around and behind the band answer in sequence, with the evocative sound of tam-tams creating the Messiaen-like aura. As the horns gradually approach the performing space, the trumpets assume individual musical personalities in a series of contrasting virtuoso fanfares. Wild timpani glissandi and gongs provide the colour in anticipation of the entry of the organ and a resplendent first climax, with horns now in full voice on stage. We hear the distant sounds of the seventh trumpet for the first time towards the end of the modal central section. The soloist here is required to play one of the most extreme cadenzas in the brass band repertory. Covering the entire compass of the instrument, it is supported first by a gentle repeated figure on the organ and then by a holy trinity of 'Messiaen' gongs. As the music builds towards its triumphant conclusion, the Messiaen-inspired tritone formation of the principal horn motif is ironed out and combines with the modal material to provide a final full-voiced chorale, over which the seventh trumpet blazes forth from on high.

Rococo Variations

During the writing of the Saxophone Concerto (2006), Gregson was left with a 'slab of material', which he knew would not fit into that

work. I recall him saying at the time that with a bit of tweaking it had the makings of a great brass band piece. An opportunity arose the following year through a commission from the British Open Brass Band Championship and the Norwegian Band Federation. The resulting work was *Rococo Variations,* completed early in 2008. Gregson had composed variations for brass band before – *Variations on Laudate Dominum* and *Connotations* from the late 1970s – but the idea of using a quasi-baroque theme as the basis for a series of symphonic variations was something new:

> The theme I used for *Connotations* was quite angular, built out of fourths, and it conditioned the way the piece sounded. I have taken the rococo theme on a much wider stylistic journey, using it as a quarry for motifs and ideas. I tried to create contrasting musical worlds for each movement, while maintaining, in an organic way, some contact with the theme.

The title refers to the elegant cast of the theme, which is in sarabande rhythm, and the way it should be played, not to its working out or its sub-text. While its six variation movements take on surface characteristics of a dance suite, embedded in each is a tribute to a composer Gregson much admires. Unlike the Violin Concerto and *The Trumpets of the Angels*, these are direct quotations – respectful doffs of the cap, which came about almost by chance: 'The shell of the whole piece was there before I decided to add them.' The *Toccata* first variation, with its clipped rhythms and scurrying canonic scales, was the appropriate place to work-in the little four-note musical motto which conductor and composer Elgar Howarth used in a number of his band works, beginning with *Mosaic* (1957).

The stately *Siciliana* (2) incorporates, as a counter-subject, a melody from an early suite for brass band, *Lord of the Sea* (1957)*,* by the distinguished composer for the Salvation Army, Ray Steadman-Allen. As a young man Gregson remembers the eagerness with which every new RS-A work was anticipated: 'That's the kind of music I wanted to compose!'. The *Waltz* (3) is pure tongue-in-cheek – a light-hearted gesture of homage to the favourite brass band composer of the last century, Eric Ball:

> Eric enjoyed writing variations in the traditional 'air varié' manner. I love what he does in the second movement of *Tournament for Brass* for example; so I decided to write an 'air varié' of my own. It gets a bit darker in the middle and, as I wanted to pay homage to him, ending with a little reference on the

solo horn to the beginning of his tone poem *Journey into Freedom* (1964) seemed the right thing to do.

The *Moto Perpetuo* (4) is fast and furious. As it moves towards its final climax, Gregson weaves in the main theme from a much-admired brass band work, *Cloudcatcher Fells* (1984) by his friend and fellow composer John McCabe. The extended *Lament* is the emotional heart of *Rococo Variations*. Gregson casts it as an intense, densely worked chaconne, beloved of composers like Purcell and Bach. The middle section works towards a brief but unmistakable quotation from the slow movement Wilfred Heaton's much-admired *Contest Music* (1973): 'This is my tribute to one of the most original composers writing for brass bands in the 20th century'.

The *Fugal Scherzo* (5) mirrors the contrapuntal gigues that end so many of Bach's suites. Gregson pays tribute here to a contemporary master of counterpoint, Philip Wilby, whose brass band music has been enormously influential over the past twenty years. In a typically felicitous touch, the growing tension in the counterpoint is created by a counter-subject formed from a twelve-tone row. As the scherzo builds to its final climax, Gregson ingeniously combines a fragment of his own theme with further references to McCabe, Howarth, Heaton and the sixth dedicatee, Wilby (from *The New Jerusalem*), plus a hint of the fanfare from Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo*, all in the space of eight bars – a moment of technical brilliance.

Symphony in Two Movements

The element of tribute in Gregson's next brass band work lies entirely in the circumstances of the commission rather than its sound world or musical processes. Two years after the successful launch of *Rococo Variations* at the British Open Brass Band Championships in Birmingham, he received a joint commission from the National Youth Brass Bands of Great Britain and Wales in celebration of their 60th and 30th anniversaries. *Symphony in Two Movements* (2012) is by some margin Gregson's most complete abstract work for the medium. While the title might suggest connections with Stravinsky (whose *Symphony in Three Movements* is a Gregson favourite) or even Prokofiev (Symphony no. 2), the idea of pairing a concise sonata first movement with a more expansive theme and four variations (drawing together into a single span the contrasting elements of a traditionally laid out symphony) sprang from Beethoven's last Piano Sonata in C minor (op. 111), although that is where the comparisons end.

Gregson's thematic quarry is an eleven-note row, which he exploits to the full in both movements:

I've never been that interested in writing serial music *per se*, but what interests me more is how some of the procedures can be applied. The rigour of taking a set of notes, in this case an eleven-note row, and applying inversions, retrogrades, and then inverting the retrograde, but within my tonal framework, provided me with four different but related statements. This is clearly audible in the first movement but also in the second, which shares some of the same material. Right at the end the 'row' returns in counterpoint to the first movement's second subject in a way which recapitulates the whole work, giving it a symphonic dimension.

It is interesting that Gregson has returned for his first symphony to the medium for which he first started writing:

There are a number of reasons for that. Maybe I felt safer writing for the world in which I grew up and wanted to write the most serious form of musical expression, for that medium. When you think that the symphony as we know it dates from the middle of the 18th century and here we are 250 years later and composers are still writing them, it's a challenge for anyone and it particularly pleased me to be able to write a work which challenged young performers technically and musically.

Invading musical worlds

Of all the tributes introduced thus far only the *Trumpets of the Angels* can be said to 'invade the stylistic world' of another composer, and this is not consistent in its application through the piece. However, in three very different recent works Gregson's own voice appears to recede as the subjects of his homage are more consistently emphasized, but with a contemporary personal twist.

Dream Song

The first of these was commissioned by BBC Radio 3 as part of a series of twenty-minute orchestral works to sit alongside the Mahler symphonies performed by the BBC Philharmonic and the Hallé at the Bridgewater Hall early in 2010. Gregson's work was scheduled to sit alongside a performance of Mahler's Sixth Symphony by the BBC Philharmonic under Gianandrea Noseda and, true to form, he was the only one of the group to relate his music directly to the Mahler.

I decided to invade Mahler's world of musical ideas. So the title is intended to convey a half-remembered landscape of some of the themes and motifs from the Sixth Symphony, fragmented, you could say deconstructed, as in a

dream with the all-pervading presence of the opening phrase, more often than not the first four notes of what's known as the Alma theme from the first movement. I use this as a leitmotif to give *Dream Song* a coherence.

Gregson set himself a difficult task attempting to reflect the multi-layered facets of Mahler's turbulent musical and emotional world in just twenty minutes, less than the length of some of Mahler's first movements. His intention was to create a parallel musical world encompassed within a slow-fast-slow arc. The essence and intensity of Mahler pervades the whole work like a dream. The Symphony's principal themes and sounds are summoned almost to the surface only to recede and then resurface, subtly transformed into an unsettling nightmare vision, but not as a pastiche. Gregson's considerable achievement is to suggest and evoke Mahler's world, but to remain entirely himself in the way the material is manipulated and structured.

Our attention is grabbed right at the start by a dramatic ten-note polychord, layered in triads. As it fades away, fragments that sound like Mahler mysteriously come and go. Just as in the concertos referred to earlier, the music seems to be searching for a theme, but this time it does not fully materialize. The music escapes through 'a dream-like narrative' into the menacing world of a Mahlerian scherzo, with pounding bass lines. An enigmatic pastoral trio provides Gregson's formal fulcrum, after which the menace of the scherzo returns to reach an unnerving climax with insistent jabs of the chord heard as the dream began. The nightmare visions recede through a second illusive dream sequence into a gentle love song, clearly derived from the Alma theme (its retrograde), but in calm resolution; unlike the Mahler, *Dream Song* ends 'peacefully albeit bitter-sweet'.

Dream Song is a beautifully crafted and intense work, looking back to Mahler's musical world but viewed through Gregson's contemporary, post-Bergian sound world that includes an array of 'phones and 'spiels in the percussion, where Mahler's 'old world' cowbells are counterbalanced by the contemporary tone of steel pans.

Of Distant Memories (Music in an Olden Style)

On 26 May 1913, three days before Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* received its riotous first performance in Paris, an announcement had appeared in the weekly newspaper for brass bands, *The British Bandsman*, that a piece of 'originally composed music' was to be used as the test-piece for the National Brass Band Championships later in the year. In its way those few lines have proved as significant for the

amateur brass band community as the staged furore surrounding Stravinsky's ballet. The piece selected was a tone poem entitled *Labour and Love*, and its composer Percy Fletcher, who had made his name in the musical theatre.

Soon after completing the *Symphony in Two Movements*, over which he laboured for the best part of a year, Gregson set about writing a centenary tribute to Percy Fletcher and the other early pioneers of the band repertoire. He called it *Of Distant Memories* and it flowed from his pen in six untroubled weeks. It opens with a romantic melody, full of nostalgia for that lost age and sounding rather like the youthful Gregson from his Salvation Army days. Much of the fast music in *Of Distant Memories* does not sound like Gregson at all, youthful or more experienced.

> I wanted to evoke memories of all those early composers like Fletcher, Cyril Jenkins and Holst, and here's me in 2013 saying 'hats off' gentlemen for writing band music that started to make a real impression. I've tried to summon up certain stylistic characterizations, for example chromatic runs, dramatic trills and rhetorical sequences of diminished sevenths that Fletcher, Cyril Jenkins and others borrowed from Liszt, which I would never write myself. But I'm looking through a contemporary lens as it were, because there are textural and harmonic aspects that would never have been used then.

Of Distant Memories might be described as a piece of 'retro-styling', although there are moments, particularly in the modal slow section, and in the syncopated surge towards the resplendent closing section, when something of the mature voice of Edward Gregson comes to the fore. Although commissioned by the Black Dyke Band and The Worshipful Company of Musicians for concert performance at the 2013 RNCM Festival of Brass in Manchester, *Of Distant Memories* was written as a test-piece and was heard for the first time at a band contest in October 2013 at the National Championship Finals at the Royal Albert Hall.

Tributes for clarinet and piano

In the third work of self-confessed 'style conversion', *Tributes* for clarinet and piano (2010), Gregson hides his musical identity altogether in a set of five miniatures in which he adopts a different musical persona for each of the five short pieces as a tribute to the composers' contributions to the clarinet repertoire. With chameleon-like attention to detail, Gregson's musical disguises begin with a witty take on Poulenc. The lyrical second number is inscribed 'to Gerald

Finzi', although the element of imitation here is perhaps a more generalized 'English pastoral'. The third is a skilful impersonation of Igor Stravinsky at his sharpest rhythmically, while the long, undulating line in the fourth number is an acknowledged paraphrase of the haunting *Louange a l'éternité de Jesus* from Messiaen's *Quatour pour le fin de temps*; and finally the composer from whom Gregson learned so much about musical form and thematic rigour in the 20th century, *to Bela Bartók.* The opening nod towards the Hungarian's clarinet trio *Contrasts* is hardly needed here. It's a brilliant piece of mimicry.

Music for sundry occasions

In this survey of Edward Gregson's Manchester music, I have focused on one significant aspect of his writing – the various ways in which paying tribute to much-loved composers and their works, or acknowledging the contribution to a range of genres of the great composers or traditions of the recent past has enriched his own music. The body of work created is remarkable for its consistency of form and content as well as its expressive range. No two pieces appear the same, yet close examination reveals the same distinctive hand at work. The quality of his craft is no less in works where the musical cap is being doffed in a less significant way or not at all.

One of his first works after arriving in Manchester was an extended song for boys' voices commissioned for the Royal official opening of The Bridgewater Hall, expanded in 1997 into *A Welcome Ode*. Two years later Gregon's most substantial choral work to date appeared, *The Dance for Ever the Dance* (1999). This four-movement cantata for mezzo soprano, chorus and orchestra was commissioned by Michael Kibblewhite and the Hertfordshire Chorus for performance in St Alban's Cathedral. The Bach Choir conducted by David Hill gave the London premiere at the Royal Festival Hall in 2004 and it received its first Manchester performance in the Bridgewater Hall, July 2008, by the RNCM Chorus and Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Clark Rundell. Gregson compiled his own text from a variety of sources, including Byron, Lewis Carroll, Oscar Wilde and W. H. Auden, freely adapting them to devise a work of symphonic cast and ambition. Of particular interest in the context of this article is the third movement, a sinister *Dance of Death*, which sets Wilde's sinister and sensual *The Harlot's House* to music parodying the Viennese waltz in a manner consciously reflecting Ravel's *La Valse*.

A brief *Romance* for recorder (2003) and a chamber orchestra version of the much performed *Three Matisse Impressions* (1997) were commissioned by the distinguished recorder player John Turner. In 2008, Gregson contributed a short as yet unpublished song, *Remember*, for the 80th birthday celebrations of his predecessor as RNCM principal, Sir John Manduell. The following year two short *pièces d'occasion* for string orchestra, *Stepping Out* (1996), a lively miniature written for the RNCM String Orchestra to play at the Barbican, London, and *Goddess* (2009), a haunting essay commissioned by the Ida Carroll Trust composed in memory of the artist Dorothy Bradford, were brought together for volume two of the Gregson edition on Chandos. *Aztec Dances* (2010) is a substantial suite of dances for recorder (or flute) and piano, commissioned by another recorder virtuoso, Christopher Orton, and premiered at a Manchester Mid-Day Concerts Society recital in March 2010, in the Bridgewater Hall. This colourful work was elaborated into a Concerto for Flute and Ensemble in Spring 2013.

For the RNCM Manchester International Violin Competition in 2011, Gregson was commissioned to compose the test piece. The three concise musical 'panels' of *Triptych* are founded on Greco-Roman mythological sources. 'A Dionysian Dialogue' contrasts the Dionysian – raw earthy, sometimes violent, often ecstatic – with the Apollonian – serene, calm, assured. Momentary quotations from Stravinsky (*Histoire du soldat*) and Shostakovich (first Violin Concerto) represent the former, while a gesture from Walton's Violin Concerto and a phrase of Bach represent the latter. 'Song to Aphrodite' is a song with two variations, while the finale, 'A Celtic Bacchanal', is based on the Irish reel music of the Violin Concerto's last movement.

As I write (June 2013), a new brass band version of the Trombone Concerto (1979) has just been recorded and an orchestration of the youthful French Horn Concerto (1971) is well underway. A fifth volume of Gregson's brass band music has just been recorded for the Doyen Recordings label and a fourth volume of the Gregson orchestral edition on Chandos, including *Dream Song* and the *Aztec Dances Concerto*, is due for release in 2014.

Always enthusiastic to take on a fresh challenge, Gregson is about to start work in his first String Quartet, which has been commissioned by the Manchester Mid-Day Concerts Society (MMDCS) for performance in March 2015 during its centenary season and the

composer's 70th year. Having invited him to write it in my role as MMDCS Director of Concerts, I look forward with keen anticipation to this double birthday celebration.

Select Discography

Olympia OCD 667 (2000), re-released on Naxos 8.572503
English Recorder Music, including *Three Matisse Impressions*
John Turner (recorder), Royal Ballet Sinfonia conducted by the composer

Polyphonic QPRM 143D (2000)
The Kings go Forth (Suite for symphonic wind orchestra after Shakespeare)
Central band of the RAF conducted by Wing Commander Rob Wiffin

Chandos CHAN 10105 (2003)
Blazon, Clarinet Concerto, *Stepping Out*, Violin Concerto
Michael Collins (clarinet), Olivier Charlier (violin),
BBC Philharmonic conducted by Martyn Brabbins

Dutton CDLX7180 (2007)
In Manchester: new music for oboe from the RNCM,
including *Shadow of Paradise*
Melinda Maxwell (oboe), Richard Benjafield (percussion)

Chandos CHAN 10478 (2008)
Trumpet Concerto, Concerto for Piano and Wind '*Homages*', Saxophone Concerto
Ole Edvard Antonsen (trumpet), Nobuya Sugawa (saxophone), Nelson Goerner (piano)
BBC Philharmonic conducted by Clark Rundell

Chandos CHAN 10627 (2011)
Music for Chamber Orchestra, Trombone Concerto, *Two Pictures*, *A Song for Chris*

Peter Moore (trombone), Guy Johnston (cello)
BBC Concert Orchestra conducted by Bramwell Tovey

Chandos CHAN 10758 (2013)
British Clarinet Sonatas (Volume 2), including *Tributes*
Michael Collins (clarinet), Michael McHale (piano)

Doyen Recordings DOY CD252 (2 CDs)
The Gregson Collection, featuring *The Trumpets of the Angels*, *Rococo Variations*, *Variations on Laudate Dominum* (1976, rev. with two additional variations in 2007) and extracts from *An Age of Kings* (drawn from incidental music composed for Royal Shakespeare Company)
Black Dyke Band conducted by Nicholas Childs, Foden's Band conducted by Garry Cutt

Campion Cameo 2034
Romance for recorder and string quartet
John Turner (recorder), Camerata Ensemble

Prima Facie PFCD004
Remember, for soprano, recorder, oboe, violin, and cello
Lesley-Jane Rogers (soprano), John Turner (recorder), Richard Simpson (oboe), Richard Howarth (violin), Jonathan Price (cello)